

A hierarchical approach to Brand Personality: an application to brand innovativeness

Claire-Lise ACKERMANN, Audencia Business School, clackermann@audencia.com

Blandine HETET, IDRAC Business School, blandine.hetet@gmail.com

Abstract : Brand personality research usually adopts a psycho-lexical perspective to identify several dimensions subsuming brand personality. We explore whether a context-specific, single trait approach can be considered to understand brand personality. More precisely, we adopt a hierarchical approach, similar to that found in research on human personality, and we use brand innovativeness as our context of investigation. We view brand innovativeness as a brand personality trait capturing the extent to which consumers believe the brand is consistent in its innovative behavior. Brand innovativeness can be understood in terms of two core dimensions, creativity and *Zeitgeist*. We propose a hierarchical model in which brand personality traits, namely Activity, Responsibility, and Simplicity, are cardinal traits within the model, Creativity and *Zeitgeist* are the central traits, and brand innovativeness is a surface trait. Results from a quantitative study provide support for this model: the indirect effects of Activity on brand innovativeness through Creativity is positive and significant; the indirect effect of Simplicity on brand innovativeness through Creativity is negative and significant; and the indirect effect of Responsibility on brand innovativeness through *Zeitgeist* is positive and significant. To the extent of our knowledge, no research had adopted a hierarchical approach to brand personality, explaining how underlying brand personality traits relate to context-specific surface traits.

Key Words: Brand personality, brand innovativeness

Introduction

The concept of Brand Personality is informed by the recognition that consumers engage in anthropomorphizing, whereby they attribute human characteristics to nonhuman entities, including brands (Eisend and Stokburger-Sauer, 2013). Accordingly, Aaker (1997, p 347) defined brand personality as the “set of human characteristics associated with a brand”. Creating a brand personality facilitates the brand choice process (Puzakova et al., 2013). Additionally, brand personality traits have also been found to predict important brand (e.g., brand engagement, brand satisfaction, brand trust, [Davies et al., 2018; Puzakova et al., 2013]) and behavioral outcomes (e.g. purchase intention, Eisend and Stokburger-Sauer, 2013). Thus, the personality of a brand is an asset of strategic importance that should be prized and preserved.

One broad area of brand personality investigation concerns its measure (e.g., Aaker, 1997; d’Astous and Levesque, 2003; Geuens et al. 2009; Sung et al. 2015). Brand personality scholars followed an approach similar to that used by researchers in psychology, aiming to identify several dimensions subsuming human personality (e.g. the Five Factor Model, Norman 1963). They adopted a psycho-lexical approach and started with a set of characteristics that describe human personality. Exploratory Factor Analysis (EFA) based on empirical data was used to refine the model. Interestingly, brand personality research has mostly adopted a multi-trait approach, whereby the personality scale attempts to identify and measure the cardinal brand personality traits that subsume brand personality (e.g., Aaker 1997; Geuens et al. 2009), disregarding single trait approaches which would explore the brand disposition to act in a specific context.

In this research, we investigate whether a single trait approach could not be considered to understand brand personality. More precisely, we aim to adopt a hierarchical approach, similar to that found in research on human personality (Bosnjak et al. 2007; Mowen and Spears 1999; Lindblom et al. 2020), and we use brand innovativeness as our context of investigation. Rebalancing brand personality research from a psycho-lexical perspective to a context-specific perspective is important because it may provide brand scholars and brand managers with a new perspective and new tools for brand personality.

A hierarchical approach to brand personality

A hierarchical approach to human personality distinguishes between three levels of personality traits: cardinal, central, and surface (Mowen and Spears, 1999). Surface traits refer to a disposition to act within a specific context and are the immediate determinants of behavior (Bosnjak et al. 2007; Mowen and Spears 1999). In contrast to surface traits, cardinal traits refer to the basic, underlying predisposition dimensions that arise from genetics and early learning history (Mowen and Spears 1999). Central traits are the third category of individual differences found in the hierarchical model (Mowen and Spears 1999). These differences are more narrowly focused than cardinal traits: the cardinal traits are predictive of central traits, which may act as mediators of the effect of cardinal traits on surface traits (Mowen and Spears 1999). In Mowen and Spears’s (1999) model of compulsive buying tendency, the cardinal traits include the Big Five personality traits (Costa and McCrae 1985), and materialism and arousal are central traits that mediate the effect of cardinal traits on compulsive buying.

We argue that a hierarchical approach can be adopted to understand how consumers relate a surface brand personality trait to other underlying brand personality dimensions. We more specifically investigate brand innovativeness as a brand personality trait. Consistent with the view that a brand personality trait is inferred by consumers from an observable pattern of brand behaviors (Aaker 1997), brand innovativeness can be viewed as a brand personality trait

capturing the extent to which consumers believe the brand is consistent in its innovative behavior (Ackermann and Hetet, 2024).

So far, brand personality research has mostly adopted a multi-trait approach, attempting to identify the main underlying traits of brand behavior (Aaker 1997; Geuens et al. 2009). We suggest that these traits could be considered as brand cardinal traits that predict brand innovativeness, arguably thus a surface trait within a hierarchical model. We aim to identify central traits mediating between the cardinal traits and the surface trait within the model.

This paper reports results from three empirical studies. Study 1 is a qualitative study whose aim was to (1) identify the central traits within the model, to (2) develop an initial version of the scale measuring them. Study 2 is a quantitative study whose aim is to assess the validity of the scale.

Study 3 is a quantitative study whose aim is to assess the relationship between the brand cardinal traits, the central traits, and the surface trait, i.e. brand innovativeness.

Study 1

We conducted semi-structured interviews in which we probed attributes that confer innovativeness to a brand (N= 27; F=56%). Thematic analysis indicate that most participants view innovative brands as not only being able to introduce innovative offerings but also as being able to adopt innovative processes and to interact in an innovative way with consumers. A first theme emerging from our analysis relates to perceptions that an innovative brand is creative, i.e., regularly generating or exploring new concepts and pioneering products/processes before its competitors. A second theme relates to *Zeitgeist*¹: innovative brands capture the spirit and essence of the time, not only in terms of consumers' needs or habits, but also in terms of societal concerns. Accordingly, we generated an initial pool of 22 items (Creativity: 14; *Zeitgeist*: 8).

Study 2 (a)

This quantitative pilot study aimed to refine the scale by limiting it to a more manageable number of items and to explore its reliability and dimensionality. We recruited a student sample from a French university (N = 203) for an online survey in exchange for course credit. Participants were randomly required to evaluate one brand among the ten most preferred in France ((e.g., L'Oréal Paris, Yves Rocher, Lego,...) on each of the items identified in Study 1. Of the responses, 17 respondents were eliminated for failing the two attention checks (8.37%), resulting in a final sample of 186 participants (F=59.2%). An EFA (Exploratory Factor Analysis) using maximum likelihood estimation and promax rotation yielded four factors based on eigenvalues greater than 1. We used the following criteria for item retention: each item must load higher than .50 on its focal factor and not cross-load on any other factor at more than .30 (Hair et al. 2013). From the 22 items, we removed six items for cross-loading on multiple factors, and three items loading on an independent factor. Thus, 13 items were retained, grouped into two reliable dimensions (Cronbach's alphas > .70): Creativity: seven items ($\alpha = .851$); and *Zeitgeist*: six items ($\alpha = .830$). The two factors account for 54.26% of the total variance, and each factor explains at least 14.71% of the total variance. This study provides preliminary support for the psychometric robustness of the scale.

Study 2 (b)

¹ *Zeitgeist* comes from German - *zeit* means "time" and *geist* means "spirit", - and refers to the intellectual, moral, and cultural climate during a certain period

The objectives of this study was to submit the items retained after the EFA to a CFA (Confirmatory Factor Analysis) using a different sample.

Two hundred and five students from a French university were recruited for an online survey and offered course credit for their participation. Similar to Study 2a, participants were randomly required to evaluate one brand among the ten most preferred in France on each of the scale items retained after Study 2a. Fourteen responses were deleted for failing the two attention checks (6.83%), resulting in a final sample of 191 participants (F=55.5%).

On the basis of the CFA results, we removed three items with highly correlated errors. One Creativity item and one *Zeitgeist* item with factor loadings equal to .67 were retained because of their unique contribution to the content of the scale (Rossiter 2002).

Confirming results from Study 2a, we find strong support for the hypothesized two-factor model. The resulting χ^2 -value of 57.85 and $df = 34$ is significant at $p = .007$. The fit indices (CFI = .971, RMSEA = .061, and SRMR = .048) indicate a good model fit. Composite reliability (CR) indexes and average variance extracted (AVE) meet the acceptable levels suggested by Fornell and Larcker (1981) with CR indexes above .78 and AVE above .52, thus providing evidence of convergent validity. Discriminant validity between the two dimensions of the scale was assessed according to the criterion proposed by Fornell and Larcker (1981) whereby the AVE is always larger than the squared correlations between the factors: $AVE_{Creativity} = .52$; $AVE_{Zeitgeist} = .56$; squared correlations between the factors = .38. The final scale consists of 10 items, with five items for each of the two dimensions.

Study 3

The objective of Study 3 is (1) to develop a hierarchical model of brand innovativeness, and (2) to test it. We consider Creativity and *Zeitgeist* as the central traits, mediating between the cardinal traits and the surface trait, i.e. brand innovativeness, within the model. We identify Activity, Responsibility, and Simplicity from Geuens et al.'s (2009) brand personality model, as cardinal traits within the model.

Activity refers to the perception that the brand is active and dynamic (Geuens et al. 2009). Arguably, perceptions that a brand is active are likely to result in perceptions that a brand is creative. Creativity involves the ability to produce novel and original tangible outcomes, which, in a business context, may involve products, services or any other type of branding initiatives (Amabile 1997). Thus, consumers are more likely to perceive the brand as being creative if they perceive it to be active. Consequently, we suggest that perceptions that the brand is active informs perceptions that the brand is innovative, this effect being mediated by perceptions that the brand is creative. Stated formally:

H1: Creativity mediates the positive effect of activity on innovativeness.

Simplicity refers to the perception that the brand is ordinary and simple (Geuens et al. 2009). A simple brand will be perceived to lack special and distinctive features. Creativity, in contrast, involves the brand's ability to produce novel and original outcomes. Thus, it is likely that high perceptions of brand simplicity may result in low perceptions of brand creativity. Accordingly, we suggest that perceptions that the brand is simple have a negative effect on perceptions that the brand is innovative, this effect being mediated by perceptions that the brand is low on creativity. Stated formally:

H2: Creativity mediates the negative effect of simplicity on innovativeness.

As for responsibility, this refers to the perception that the brand is reliable and social (Geuens et al. 2009). The *Zeitgeist* dimension refers to the ability of the brand to capture the essence of the time, especially in terms of societal concerns. Accordingly, consumers may be more likely to perceive the brand to have a *Zeitgeist* orientation, especially when it comes to understanding social responsibility concerns if they perceive the brand to demonstrate a sense of responsibility. Thus, we suggest that perceptions that the brand is responsible informs perceptions that the brand is innovative, this effect being mediated by perceptions that the brand has a *Zeitgeist* orientation. Stated formally:

H3: *Zeitgeist* mediates the positive effect of responsibility on innovativeness.

Eight hundred and two students were recruited for an online survey and offered course credit for their participation. Fifteen incomplete answers (1.88%) were not retained, and 65 responses were deleted for failing the two attention checks (8.12%), resulting in a final sample of 722 participants (F=53.3%). Participants were randomly required to evaluate one brand among the ten most preferred in France on the Creativity and *Zeitgeist* dimension developed in Study 2, before evaluating the brand on the Activity, Responsibility, and Simplicity dimensions of Geuens et al.'s (2009) brand personality scale. Finally, the item “[Brand name] is an innovative brand” was included to provide a holistic assessment of brand innovativeness.

Results of a CFA indicate that the measurement model yields a good fit to the data ($\chi^2(94) = 340.47, p < .001$; CFI = .945, RMSEA = .060, and SRMR = .051). All factor loadings are greater than .63, AVE ranges from .50 to .60, and all constructs display composite reliability greater than .69, thus establishing convergent validity. Finally, the AVE for each construct was higher than the squared correlation estimates between constructs, so discriminant validity was established (Fornell and Larcker 1981).

We used the PROCESS macro to estimate the significance of the indirect effects of, respectively, Activity, Simplicity and Responsibility on perceptions of brand innovativeness through Creativity and *Zeitgeist*. Effects are considered significant if the confidence interval excludes 0.

The indirect effects of Activity on brand innovativeness through Creativity is positive and significant (coeff = .32, 95% CI [.2526; .3939]). The indirect effect of Simplicity on brand innovativeness through Creativity is negative and significant (coeff = -.11, 95% CI [-.1533; -.0641]). Finally, the indirect effect of Responsibility on brand innovativeness through *Zeitgeist* is positive and significant (coeff = .24, 95% CI [.1840; .2986]). Thus H1, H2 and H3 are supported.

Theoretical and Practical Implications

We make a contribution to the brand personality literature by suggesting a hierarchical approach can be adopted to understand how basic, underlying brand personality traits relate to context-specific surface traits. We also make a contribution to the brand innovativeness literature by suggesting brand innovativeness scope should not be limited to consumers' perceptions of the brand's R&D efforts (e.g., REF)

Our research may also be insightful for brand managers considering brand (re)positioning. The hierarchical approach may be useful for managers aiming to position their brand as innovative. Even if their brand was to score low on innovativeness due to an absence of track record of innovative behaviors, high scores on activity and responsibility, and a low score on simplicity would suggest that consumers already associate the brand with the underlying traits favoring perceptions of brand innovativeness, thus favoring brand (re)positioning.

Future research may explore other context-specific brand personality traits. Specifically, in keeping with the hierarchical approach to brand personality we introduce, future research may investigate how such context-specific brand personality traits relate to underlying cardinal brand personality traits.

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